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Making a Spectacle of Oneself in the Academy Using the H-Index: From Becoming an Artificial Person to Laughing at Absurdities

Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This article offers autoethnographic insights into the consequences of making a spectacle of oneself in the audit culture of the academy. Spectacle 1 explores my experiences of using the h-index as part of an annual salary review and how this made me feel like an artificial person. Spectacle 2 shows how, at a conference, I used laughter to expose some absurdities of the h-index and felt better for doing so. Stories that tell different truths about ourselves in combination with the corporeality of laughter, I suggest, can assist us to re-attune ourselves and resist the process of becoming artificial persons.

Keywords

audit culture, politics and culture, spectacle, artificial person, laughter, autoethnography, ethnographies, methodologies

Introduction

A great deal has changed since I first gained university employment in the mid-1980s, not all of it for the better.¹ In recent years, various scholars have documented the deep affective somatic and spiritual crises that many academics are suffering from that threatens to overwhelm them as they are propelled toward burnout or something worse (Burrows, 2012; Gill, 2010; Moriarty, 2019; Pelias, 2004; Sparkes, 2007). The reasons why these various crises have come about since the early 1990s has been well documented and critiqued (Collini, 2017; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Davies et al., 2006; Smyth, 2017; Spooner, 2018; Spooner & McNinch, 2018; Tourish, 2019; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). This literature consistently places the blame for the deleterious changes in universities, and their subsequent impact on academic work and life, at the feet of the neoliberal project and the changes brought about by the processes of neoliberalization. One such process has been the development of an audit culture. This involves the quantification and evaluation of academic work along with an increasing dependence on these quantitative measures to define and assess academic productivity and efficiency as well as the reputation of individuals, disciplines and institutions.

According to Shore (2008), the term “audit culture” is of recent origin and was coined by sociologists and anthropologists to describe not so much a type of society, place, or people so much as a *condition* shaped by the use of “modern techniques and principles of financial audit, but in contexts

far removed from the world of financial accountancy” (p. 279). For Schwandt (2015), however, the audit culture is not just about techniques but involves a “system of values and goals that becomes inscribed in social practices thereby influencing the self-understanding of a practice and its role in society” (p. 9).

In his detailed analysis of the rise of the audit culture in the academy, Spooner (2018) points out that while “productivity” pressures in academic settings are not new, what *is* new under the contemporary audit culture “is the sheer magnitude, depth, and ubiquity of audit culture’s implementation and pervasiveness” (p. 901). This has led to a situation in which academics are depersonalized, quantified, and constrained in their scholarship “via a suffocating array of metrics and technologies of governance” (p. 895). For Spooner, this situation has been made possible by the global confluence of *market*, *managerialism*, and *measurement* forces that are inextricably linked, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing in ways that lead to what he calls a “triple M” crisis that impacts in multiple ways on the daily lives of academics. In support of this, Bottrell and Manathunga (2019a) suggest that the production of an ever-expanding audit

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culture is fueled by managerial regimes that are obsessed with “academic performance, productivity and their measurement and surveillance through numerous forms of accountability” (p. 6).

Significantly, academics are now estimated to be one of the most surveilled groups in history and can be ranked on more than one hundred different scales and indices that measure their value (Erickson et al., 2020). Many, according to Tourish (2019) and Warren (2017), feel under constant surveillance and experience their working lives as a series of administrative moments involving facts and figures to be collected and submitted for various assessments and audits either pending, happening, or being autopsied. Faced with such increased scrutiny the figure of the “neurotic academic” described by Loveday (2018) has become emblematic of the contradictions facing the contemporary academy suffused as it is with anxiety. This anxiety, for many, is generated by their entanglement in what Burrows (2012) calls “metric assemblages” that have taken on a life of their own to become autonomous actors in the academy (e.g., the Research Excellence Framework in the UK). Such assemblages, according to Han (2020), are an essential feature under neoliberalism of the historical shift from ritual to “dataism”:

The human being now has to comply with data . . . Enormous volumes of data displace the human being from its central position as producer of knowledge, and the human being itself is reduced to a data set, a variable that can be calculated and manipulated . . . Transparency, the imperative of dataism, is the source of the compulsion to transform everything into data and information, that is, to make it visible. (Han, 2020, pp. 81–82)

Dataistic regimes of performativity are made possible by dramatic increases in the amount of highly portable but depersonalized raw data available to university managers. This leads to complex social environments and the people within them becoming “machine readable” and reduced to a score that then allows academics to be metrically positioned within a hierarchy of status according to apparently “objective” managerial determinations of individual success and value to institutional prestige. In this process, as Valero et al. (2019) argue, there is no need to ask key questions about the situational or contextual conditions such as history, experience, material resources, teaching loads, and access to resources which people have available for performing their measurable activities in the first place to gain their score. Yet, these scores can now be used to make important decisions about their lives and careers.

Of course, as Cheek (2018) acknowledges, accountability is a perfectly reasonable expectation of academics and universities in relation to their use of public monies. For her, however, it is the way that research products, research production, and demonstrating accountability are thought

about that is the issue. This is particularly so when researchers become positioned “as data collectors, and research is reduced to data for meeting the criteria of these audit exercises” (p. 327). In support of this view, Tourish (2019) notes that we have now reached the stage where the systems designed to ensure accountability have overwhelmed what we are trying to do because we are always trying to feed the insatiable hunger of the beast of measurement. Feeding this beast is certainly wasteful of time, but this is just one of many negative effects brought about by the audit culture that include the withering away of collegial life along with the norms of academic community, such as, the will to critique and the promotion of critical thought (Collini, 2017; Davies, 2005; Lincoln, 2018; Smyth, 2017; Spooner, 2018; Westheimer, 2018).

Significantly, Tourish (2019) points out that “Auditing is not a neutral gaze trained on what we do. It *transforms* the subject of its inquiry” (p. 35) and materializes new ways of thinking, doing, and being in the academy. These new ways, as various scholars have suggested, transform people into auditable entities and produce specific sorts of worker subjects that require individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators, and evaluations and to focus their energies on “what counts.” (Ball, 2003; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Shore & Wright, 2015; Smyth, 2017). In addition, as newly responsabilized, flexible, entrepreneurial, and competitive individuals operating within the research marketplace, they are also expected to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation as part of becoming what Gill (2018) calls a quantified self in the neoliberal academy.

In terms of transforming oneself into “what counts” within the audit culture, academics are increasingly incited to make *spectacles* of themselves. This incitement to make a spectacle of oneself is, according to Cheek and Persson (2020), driven by the neoliberal market-based principles that have permeated higher education and created new imperatives that include the need to be visible and tell various audiences about our research and ourselves to gain and retain a competitive edge over others. This imperative, as Cheek and Øby (2019) point out, is particularly strong in relation to almetrics that involve new forms of researcher and researcher-related metrics that make the digital, online self both visible and calculable. Not surprisingly, they note that entrepreneurs and experts along with tailor-made courses in research-related institutions have now emerged to guide and help academics make the “right” kind of spectacle of themselves online so as to be “relevant” in the research marketplace.

For some, making a spectacle of oneself in the academy provides an opportunity to be successful in the research marketplace while for others, even if successful, the psychosocial costs of doing so are high as it can lead to inner conflicts and feelings of inauthenticity and low self-worth

(Gill, 2018; Moriarty, 2019; Ruth, 2008; Sparkes, 2007; Warren, 2017). This raises questions about how academics interpret and respond to this incitement to make a spectacle of themselves and how they feel emotionally about doing so in the process. Autoethnographic work that draws on personal experience to purposefully comment on and critique cultural practices, embrace vulnerability with a purpose, and create a reciprocal relationship with the audience in the hope of compelling a response would seem to be one way to address such questions (Adams & Herrmann, 2020; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Sparkes, 2020). This said, some consideration first needs to be given as to whether or not we need another autoethnography from inside the university and for what purpose.

Do We Need Another Autoethnography From Inside the University?

Over a decade ago, in her article titled “Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of the neoliberal university,” Gill (2010) called for academics to turn their analytical gaze upon themselves to examine how they live out neoliberalism at the subjective level. Since then, Gill (2018) notes the silence has been broken and there has been an immense shift in debates about the transformation of university life. Autoethnographers have played an important part in breaking this silence (e.g., Andrew, 2019; Jubas & Seidel, 2016; Moriarty, 2019; Ruth, 2008; Ruth et al., 2018; Sparkes, 2007; Warren, 2017; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). Given such work is available, one could question whether we need another autoethnography about university life, especially one written by someone like me as a privileged, White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied professor employed at an English-speaking university in the global north.

Reflecting on writing her 2010 article, Gill (2018) recalls that besides worries about being self-indulgent she also felt discomfort about privilege, both the privilege of academics generally as an occupational group, and her own particular privilege as a White, tenured academic living in a metropolitan center. She notes that her article nearly did not get written. Likewise, Ruth et al. (2018) felt uneasy about their privileged positions as academics in New Zealand attempting to talk back to the audit culture as they experience it in their “first world” university. As one of them stated, “I cannot help thinking how pathetic all these reflections seem. Privileged and well-educated academics complaining about the accountability regimes imposed upon us” (p. 160). I share such discomfort and unease.

Regarding concerns over my privileged positioning, the thoughts of Bottrell and Manathunga (2019b) are helpful. They point to the importance of naming the reconfiguration of academic work as *oppressive*, because there are now many ways that the managerial framework “silences academics and

one of the conditions it relies on is academics’ consciousness of privilege” (p. 305). Here, notions of privilege can act as a political mechanism of silencing. Yet, as they go on to say, “privilege is multifaceted, working discursively through hierarchical structures as well as horizontally as a technology of responsabilization enmeshing passion, position and politics” (p. 305). Linked to this, Spooner (2018) argues that our resistance ought to be “proportional to the academic privilege we enjoy; that is, the greater one’s privilege within the academy, the better positioned one is to resist and to fight back against audit culture and its constricting assessments” (p. 908). In this context, therefore, speaking out from positions of privilege provide a useful form of resistance and another way of breaking the multiple silences that exist within the academy.

Given the large variations that exist in what constitutes academic working lives in terms of metric assemblages and the audit culture, my experiences are likely to be very different from colleagues who work in different disciplines and types of university around the world, and even colleagues who work in the same building as me. These include early career academics, those on temporary contracts and other members of the precariat in the university who are particularly vulnerable to the coercive effects of the audit culture and so have little opportunity to place their experiences in the public domain. They are among the “silenced academics” Erickson et al. (2020) speak of within the neoliberal university permeated by a generalized culture of fear that now infuses the bodies of *all* academics, including professors, which makes them unwilling to speak openly about the conditions under which they work (Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). I know from personal experience that it’s a risky business (Sparkes, 2007, 2018). Given this situation, I ask myself who might gain and who might lose out if I do not offer my stories for consideration?

I also ask myself if there are important questions that my autoethnography might address? Here, I am encouraged by the questions asked by Lincoln (2018), such as: What does neoliberalism look like on campus, and how do faculty experience this free market doctrine in their everyday lives? How is neoliberalism translated into higher education’s social ecology? Equally, I am encouraged by Valero et al.’s (2019) recent call for a gaze that illuminates the “public secrets” of how academics, via a process of affective subjectification, turn themselves into subjects within the context of a precarious academic life and thereby show how the neoliberal ethos “works and eats itself into the language and bodies of each and every one of us” (p. 150).

On reflection, therefore, I feel there remains a need for additional autoethnographies like mine about life inside the neoliberal university as they can play an important part in building the collective body of research and scholarship in what has become known as critical university studies. The over-arching intent of such studies, according to Smyth (2017), is to foster and encourage scholarship relating to

universities that is troubled by the direction of reforms occurring around the world. This kind of work, Bottrell and Manathunga (2019a) suggest, encourages the amplification of many voices from differently positioned vantage points within the academy as a way of resisting the conditions of differentiated silencing that currently exist. It is, therefore, in the spirit of critical university studies that I now proceed to first consider a letter inviting me to make a spectacle of myself at my current university and how I made my decision to use the H-index in doing so. Next, I focus on the act of constructing the spectacle and how this made me feel about myself. These feelings are then contrasted with another invitation to become a spectacle where, once again, I responded using the h-index but this time with very different consequences for myself and others.

I hope my stories about the h-index will raise questions about who we become, and how we become, certain kinds of subjects within the neoliberal university by making the choices we do, and what effects this has on our senses of self. I also hope my stories provoke questions about how we are seduced by the audit culture and how it creates certain desires or feeds those we already have in ways that shape us to its will. This then leads to questions about the kind of academic self we want to be in the future and what this might mean for how we think about ourselves and the choices we make.

The Letter of Invitation and Deciding to Use the h-Index

My email is punctuated by frequent and insistent requirements for me to account/count for myself. We are constantly expected to draw on the skills of presentation and of inflation to write ourselves and fabricate ourselves in ever lengthier and more sophisticated CVs, annual reviews and performance management audits, which give an account of our “contributions” to research and teaching and administration and the community. Typically, now applications for posts and for promotion run to 40/50 pages and are littered with scores, indexes and ratings. *We are constantly incited to make spectacles of ourselves.* (Ball, 2015, p. 10, emphasis added)

Like Ball (2015), I am frequently expected to make a spectacle of myself for the purposes of comparison and evaluation by others. Equally, others are expected to make themselves a spectacle to me as their line-manager for the same purposes. While I recognize the need for accountability, I often feel uneasy about how I construct myself in this performance as evidenced in the following reflections on a spectacle I am invited to make of myself each year.

As in other British universities, professorial salaries in my university are reviewed on an annual basis by a Professorial Pay Review Panel. The letter I receive explaining the process involved states that “Most of the information needed to make informed decisions will be obtained

from our systems including the following: Research Grants from REMS; Research publications from Symplectic; Research Degree Supervisions from Banner.” In principle, therefore, a decision about my annual performance can be made solely on the continual spectacle made of myself via the data inputted into these systems. Accordingly, I recognize the need to regularly update my data on these systems (i.e., feed the measurement beast) to give an accurate picture of myself as an auditable entity and as a particular kind of academic (i.e., compliant and productive).

The letter also states that professors have the opportunity to provide a supplementary statement for the panel to consider. That is, to make an additional spectacle of myself for evaluation by others. This statement is optional but if one does choose to submit, we are told that “additional information should be limited to four sides of A4 focusing on performance and outputs relating to your professorial role.” Importantly, just what kind of performance and outputs should be included in the statement are not specified. That decision is mine. This leaves me with the dilemma of what to include or exclude in terms of framing the text that members of the Panel will read and judge me on in terms of awarding me (or not) a wage increase. I have always struggled with how best to construct my researcher-self in my supplementary statement to the Professorial Pay Review Panel and so have sought the advice of others about how to “strengthen” my case. In so doing, one of the things I have learned about is how to use the h-index.

The h-index was introduced by Hirsch (2005). It is a formula, based on citation numbers, for calculating the “value” of researchers in their field. As Spicer (2015) explains it:

You give an H-index to someone on the basis of the number of papers (H) that have been cited at least H times. For instance, according to Google Scholar, I have an H-index of 28. This is because I have 28 papers that are cited at least 28 times by other research papers. What this means is that a scientist is rewarded for having a range of papers with good levels of citations rather than one or two outliers with very high citations.

My first awareness of the h-index was when I wrote an article in which I tried to explore the possible conditions for a new research paradigms dialogue under the influence of neoliberalism, an audit culture, and New Public Management practices (Sparkes, 2013). Here, I pointed out that many articles had been written about the h-index that queried its validity and reliability as an indicator of scholarly impact and a measure of relative academic worth. This said, the key point, as Burrows (2012) emphasized, was the way in which this index had become a rhetorical device within the neoliberal academy to enact “academic value”:

The number is used to: inform the short-listing of candidates for new posts; as an academic “marketing device” on CVs; as a “bargaining chip” in professorial salary negotiations; as a

variable in statistical models designed to predict RAE outcomes; to rank colleagues in REF “preparedness” exercises; in decisions about institutional restructuring; and to inform decisions about whether or not to accept papers written by particular authors in journals. (Burrows, 2012, p. 361–362)

Having completed the article, I thought no more of the h-index. It did not appeal to my sensibilities or how I thought about scholarship and the scholars that I held in high esteem. In 2013, I did not know what my h-index score was. But then, in my role as external referee for people applying for a new post or sitting on committees at my own university where staff were applying for promotion, I observed that more and more were citing their h-index.

Significantly, it was often assumed by the applicant that the readers of their application would, and should, be familiar with both the h-index and the significance of the score given. Likewise, it was also assumed that stating their h-index was an important piece of information for establishing their credibility and relative status to others. That is, the “better” their h-index, then the “better” they were as a researcher. In this regard, my observations confirm those made by Cheek (2018, 2019) that the h-index has become a common taken-for-granted “data double” and normalized as part of a metric-derived currency that can be used to establish the relative ranking of an individual researcher when compared to other researchers who are seeking, for example, to gain promotion or not be selected for redundancy. At the time, I recognized that applicants were choosing to include their h-index for tactical reasons in the hope of giving themselves a competitive edge over others. For me, however, this was not a game I cared to play. I still did not know what my own h-index was nor cared about it.

Then, in 2018, the letter arrived about the annual salary review for professors. As usual, I struggled to put together my supplementary statement when, suddenly, the notion of the h-index pinged inside my head. I emailed a trusted friend and professor at a prestigious university (i.e., high up the rankings in the UK national league table) to ask him if he could find out what my h-index was, and whether or not it was worth mentioning in my supplementary statement. He responded giving me my h-index and told me that, even though he knew I would not like doing so, there was no way, particularly as a qualitative researcher working in a marginal area, that I could not include it in my supplementary letter. He also expressed amusement that I really did not know my own h-index when, as he put it “I know loads of academics who not only check their own h-index on a regular basis but also know the h-index of all their rivals.”

My friend told me, in a kind way, that I needed to “get real” about how I presented myself to senior management in such letters as they “only deal in numbers. It’s the only thing they are interested in. It’s the only language they understand. I know you don’t believe in it, but they do, and

they control the game. And remember, it’s just a fabrication so take it for what it is.” As he finished this sentence, we both burst out laughing as I said “Ok, I get the point. I’ll put it in.” Then we went quiet as we realized just how much our conversation, and our relationship to each other in that moment had been infiltrated, shaped, and colonized by the neoliberal project and the tentacles of the audit culture.

Having said goodbye to my friend, I pondered his use of the term fabrication. By chance I had recently re-read Ball’s (2003) article in which he speaks of fabrications as part of the currency and substance of performance. Finding it in a pile of papers stacked on my desk, I read the section I had marked where he tells me that fabrications are about making a presentation of self where “front” impressions “given” and “given” off must be carefully crafted and managed, and that I needed to construct or fabricate my performance with artifice and an eye to the competition. Ball also tells me that the fabrication I produce is based upon one (or some) of a possible range of representations or versions of me as a person and that these versions will be written into existence in my performative texts as I use and re-use the “right” signifiers for the task at hand. Significantly, Ball reminds me that fabrications conceal as much as they reveal as a way of presenting myself within particular registers “within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value” (p. 225). To this, Ruth (2008) adds that how I author myself in such textual enactments or fabrications that are consciously shaped to suit a specific audience and purpose, will have a direct effect on my sense of self as an academic.

Spectacle 1: Becoming an Artificial Person

It was with a deep sense of unease that I wrote the following opening to my supplementary statement in 2018.² It was the first time I had ever referred to my h-index as part of the spectacle I made of myself in this situation.

Dear Members of the Professorial Pay Review Panel,

In terms of the strategic objective of *leading research and academic enterprise*, I am delighted to report that in the last academic year my Scopus h-index has risen to **42**. The h-index represents both the productivity (i.e., number of papers produced) and the impact (number of citations) of a particular scientist or scholar. According to Hirsch (2005) who devised this system, an h-index of 40 is **outstanding**. On Google Scholar (used by our benchmark universities for Unit 26, such as, University Names) my current h-index is **65** and this, according to Hirsch, rates as **truly exceptional**. In addition, my i10index—the number of publications by a scholar with *at least* 10 citations—currently stands at **150**.

To provide a context for this major achievement, the average h-index on Scopus of the other Professors in the (name of my

School) is (number to one decimal place), whilst for the Professors in the (name of another School) it is (number to one decimal place). Having reviewed the Scopus h-index scores the Professors in all the other Schools my scores suggest I currently have one of the highest h-index of any Professor at the University.

Reading these words now, much as when I wrote them in 2018, I feel a wave of nausea ripple through my stomach. I don't like the "me" that wrote it. I'm not sure I like the "me" that reads it now. I also don't like the "me" who "with an eye to the competition" gathered data from the website about the h-index scores of colleagues I hold in high regard and then turned them into numbers stripped of the situational or contextual conditions they work under. Even worse was my weaponizing of the scores so that I could play the comparison game in my letter of me *versus* them—with me obviously being presented as "better" in terms of ranking solely on the h-index score. In this act, as Andrew (2019) argues, I am denying and demeaning others to boost my own appearance of "honest" performativity.

As for the use of the words **outstanding** and **truly exceptional** in **bold**, I cringe with embarrassment about the narcissism and grandiosity associated with them. I am reminded of Alvesson's (2013) observation that modern society is characterized by grandiose self-personifications and claims fueled by a strong desire to be "labeled in the most attractive and pretentious terms" (p. 1). For him, grandiosity involves attempts to give oneself a positive, well-polished, and status-enhancing image, even if it is somewhat superficial.

Given the grandiosity of my claims, based on scores over which neither I, nor my colleagues, have any control, I am also reminded of the words of Leonard Cohen in his 2011 *How I Got My Song Address* at the Prince Asturias Awards in Spain. Cohen tells the audience that he feels uneasy because he has always felt some ambiguity about an award for poetry. This is because, for him, "Poetry comes from a place that no one commands, that no one conquers. So, I feel somewhat like a charlatan to accept an award for an activity that I do not command." Or, perhaps in my case, a neoliberal-grandiose-charlatan might be the best descriptor.

Despite such feelings, because my h-index on Scopus and Google Scholar had increased, I used them again in my 2019 supplementary letter. This is not surprising given that, as Ball (2012) reminds us, in regimes of performativity, experience is nothing and productivity is everything which leads to an ever-intensifying spiral of standards where last year's efforts and scores are set as the benchmark for improvement. I was also concerned that having used my h-index in my letter of 2018, not doing so in 2019 might signal a significant omission in how I represented myself a year on. For example, would the members of the Professorial Salary Review Panel interpret this absence as a sign that my

h-index had stayed the same, that I had been "static" for a year on this metric and thereby not improved my score? Unfortunately, since no detailed feedback is provided by the panel regarding applications, I had no way of knowing. What I do know, is that I felt captured by the h-index and compelled to use it again as part of making a spectacle of my academic self. As before, however, I did not like the me that chose this tactic.

I feel even more of a neoliberal-grandiose-charlatan given my growing awareness of the many problems associated with the h-index and its increasing prevalence as a measure of worth and status. For example, it is geographically biased and favors journals published in English. It also discriminates based on academic discipline, gender, age and career-stage, and forms of representation. Finally, this index is open to manipulation via self-citation and other tactics by h-index entrepreneurs within a system governed by metric maximisers (Geraci et al., 2015; Spicer, 2015; Tourish, 2019; Waltman & Eck, 2012; Warren et al., 2020; Wouter et al., 2015). In short, it's a rigged game. And yet, I had willingly played this game for my own self-enhancement and financial gain.

Against this backdrop, an existential angst permeates me. I recognize myself becoming the "artificial" person that Smith (2013) described in relation to his own personal experiences in the academy. Smith tells a story about his interactions with a "composite" colleague called Martin who epitomizes the neoliberal academic subject who revels in the audit culture and is highly successful within it. He is one of those who not only believes in but clearly benefits from the new regimes of audit as they disrupt old hierarchies and provide new avenues for rapid promotion, at least for the more research-active or managerially inclined staff like him.

Over a beer in his local pub, Smith (2013) makes a list of how Martin represents the neoliberal academic in all that he says and does not say, and what he does and does not do, within the department and university. As he goes through this list, Smith becomes disconcerted to find that despite his disagreement with and opposition to Martin's stance he is closer to him than he thinks in many ways. For example, "Martin doesn't offer critical insights during meetings with senior staff. He stays silent in each meeting. *Tick, that's me now*" (p. 192). Having reflected on a further eight comparison points between Martin and himself, Smith does not feel good about himself:

I try to rationalize my behavior or search autobiographical memories for moments that would justify the removal of my mental ticks next to most points. I can't hide though from my body's knowledge. The more I scrutinize the points the more the gouging ache of distress washes over me, coming in stronger waves as I feel my way into the realization that I was becoming someone I did not want to be. The artificial person had worked its way into me. I was putting myself in its neoliberal narrative,

and letting it live inside and through me. In the corner of my stomach, I still felt that I had some of “me” left. Yet “me” was eroding fast. I put my half empty pint down and leave. (pp. 194–195)

The intrusion of the h-index into my academic life, and my complicity as a neoliberal subject in how I used it as I did, does not make me feel good about myself. Like Smith (2013), I feel that there is a “me” that is eroding fast. In relation to this emotional sense of erosion, Warren (2017) notes that significant costs are involved in the struggle for personal visibility which is central to the process of making a spectacle of oneself in the academy. For him, this struggle can lead to a kind of existential dislocation as it makes us up in ways that are “inimical to one’s ethical sense of self, and which can contribute powerfully to an unraveling of a sense of oneself as somebody at all” (p. 138).

In more visceral terms one of the contributors to Ruth et al. (2018) acknowledges how she feels as she submits her portfolio to her university as part of the evaluation process in New Zealand called the Institutional Review of Research. She states,

I feel disgusted in myself and the university for what I have written. But I really want the conference funding and I fear losing it if I refuse to comply. I go for a long run to try to sweat away this sense of disgust, but it lingers on. (p. 156)

In the same way, my use of the h-index activates a sense of shame that lingers deep within my body as a painful experience of the self by the self seeps in.

As Dolezal (2015) reminds us, while shame is commonly associated with visibility, it is acknowledged that shame can also be an internal experience which can arise when no one else is present. In these cases, she states, shame is a state of self-devaluation that “arises as a result of an internal mechanism of assessment. The self is exposed to an internalized ‘other’ who holds the judgments and values against which the subject judges himself or herself” (p.4). Thus, the source of my shame are my thoughts about myself in terms of my actions and becoming the kind of person I do not wish to be.

Spectacle 2: Laughing at the h-Index

I was delighted to accept the invitation to make a spectacle of myself as keynote speaker at the 2019 summer conference of the *British Sociological Association Auto/Biography Study Group*. Having been a member of this group and attended its conferences for over twenty years, I defined this setting as a “holding environment” in which, according to Berg and Seeber (2016), mutual trust is based on knowledge of each other built up over time so that we can “see the

other as a whole person, not as a ‘position’ on an academic question or as an instrumentalized networking ‘contact’” (p. 88). Such an environment, they suggest, is a place where you can take risks, including the risk of being seen as less than perfect and on top of things, and thereby “offers the promise that ideas will be preserved and nurtured rather than dismissed” (p. 86).

It was, therefore, at this conference that I decided to share the story of Spectacle 1 above and how it made me feel shameful and like an artificial person. Before telling that story, I wanted to introduce the h-index to the audience as an example of a metric absurdity within the dynamics of the audit culture. But how to illustrate this absurdity? Also, how to illustrate it with humor and make fun of it rather than just offer a dull academic critique?

I knew that two founding members of the *Auto/Biography Study Group* would be present at the conference. They were called Moritz and Max (both pseudonyms) who had retired from university life some while ago. Both were held in high esteem by the members of the study group and beyond for the high quality of their scholarship. I looked up their h-index on Scopus and put their scores on a power-point so that they could be compared with my own. At the conference, I asked Moritz and Max for their permission to use their h-index scores for the purposes of comparison as part of my lecture. Both happily agreed. To my delight, neither of them knew or cared about what their h-index was. So, in my lecture, having outlined some of the key features of the ever-expanding audit culture, I introduced the concept of the h-index to the audience and how it is used as a quantitative indicator of academic quality. Then, I threw out the following question to the audience:

So, if we go on a scale of 0 to 100, what do you think the h-index score is for Moritz and Max?

What they shouted out were scores between 85 and 95 which was consistent with their views of Moritz and Max as very high-quality scholars. I told the audience that I agreed totally with their judgments and added that, like Leonard Cohen when he wrote of Hank Williams being a hundred floors above him in the tower of song, this was how I felt about myself in relation to Moritz and Max. Then I put up the power point with their actual h-index scores on Scopus:

Moritz 4

Max 11

I could see the look of disbelief on the faces in the audience as they considered the massive differences in the scores they had shouted out and the scores I’d given. Building on this I played with the notion of the h-index as an “absurd

joke.” This instigated a ripple of laughter at the nonsensical nature of the context free h-index scores when compared to what the audience members actually knew about Moritz and Max, as rounded human beings and scholars, who they had known for many years.

Next, without preamble, I put my own h-index of 43 on the screen and told the audience with a straight face: “Clearly this demonstrates that I am 10 times better than Moritz, and 4 times better than Max.” For a moment, there was sense of bemusement in the audience in case I was being serious in my claim. But then, smiling, I stated, “And that is an absurd joke, given that Moritz and Max are a hundred floors above me in the tower of song. On this we can all agree.” At this point, the audience laughed out loud and I laughed with them. Building on the energy released by this laughter I then moved on to tell them the story about how I had come to use the h-index for the first time in my supplementary letter to the promotions committee and how this made me feel like an artificial person. Laughter also accompanied various parts of this story.

During the day some of the delegates said kind things about my presentation. In particular, they spoke of how much they enjoyed laughing together at a metric used in universities to measure their worth. Several told me they felt empowered by this laughter. Others told me that laughing at the h-index took away their fear of it and recommended laughter as a way of de-bunking other metrics that invade their university lives. One told me she felt physically lighter after laughing at the metric absurdities in my presentation which was different from the heaviness she felt in her body when continually filling out forms and ticking boxes to justify her existence. Sadly, some pointed out that the collective kind of laughter they had experienced earlier with their colleagues was noticeable by its absence in their university departments. Later, in a quiet moment, I began to reflect on the power of laughter of different kinds to interrupt, refuse, and resist the daily performances of myself as a neoliberal subject within the audit culture, and how laughter might offer a potential antidote to the insidious process of me, and others, feeling shameful and becoming artificial persons in the academy.

Reflections

Complex relational and power dynamics are embedded in how contemporary universities are organized and because of this, as Spooner (2018) points out, audit cultures and practices will be diverse and unevenly distributed with different meanings and ramifications in different contexts. Just how academics negotiate and respond to the ever-burgeoning performance requirements of the audit culture and how they construct themselves within it and its various metric assemblages will, therefore, be highly differentiated according to

where, and how, they are positioned by self and others. As Barnett (2014) comments:

Each person will form her or his own response, weaving a psycho/socio/ethico tapestry, in a personal endeavour to form some pattern, permitting an accommodation between ones’ personal values and professional aspirations, and the configuration of a university’s claims on its individual academics. (p. 298)

From my privileged positioning, the stories about making a spectacle of myself using the h-index illuminate just a few of the strands that make up the weave of my own tapestry. Others who are weaving a different tapestry within the audit culture are invited to make of my stories what they will and to use them as they see fit. In relation to this, I hope my stories might be seen as a form of criticism known as “parrhesia” which, according to Ball (2016), involves speaking boldly despite the risks involved in a situation of differential power resources and also speaking frankly even when it flies in the face of the prevailing discourses. In particular, he argues, this boldness is founded on a willingness to criticize, not just social conditions “but oneself, indeed, especially oneself” (p. 1139). Being critical and honest in such self-interrogation about how and why we make spectacles of ourselves to different audiences can be, as Cheek (2019) points out, very discomfiting and risky as it challenges us to reconsider what we are doing, and perhaps have been doing for a long time. This is especially so when we have to acknowledge our complicity in, and seduction by, a system that we protest about while at the same time being implicated in the propagation and perpetuation of inequities.

Reflecting on the process of parrhesia and critiquing the self, Vicars (2019) acknowledges the discomfort involved. He points out, however, that to think critically and speak from the heart about the material and situational structures of everyday life in universities is to acknowledge that “in feeling, one is being, has become or is in the process of becoming in which there is a capacity to re-experience agency: of becoming ontologically and epistemologically re-attuned” (p. 92). As part of this re-attuning, that connects feelings to a wider landscape of scenarios, associations and experiences, Vicars suggests a rich vein of understanding can be unleashed.

At the individual level this re-attuning can, in part, be initiated by the emotion of shame that I experienced about my use of the h-index. Most often shame is seen as a powerful emotion with negative consequences. This is not always so. In their defense of shame, Deonna et al. (2012) note that shame often arises from the experience of not being able to “honor the demands consubstantial with being attached to certain values” (xii). Linked to this, Probyn (2005) points out that shame goes to the heart of who we think we are, it puts one’s self esteem on the line and questions our value system. When she is not able to hold to her values, Probyn

notes that, “Shame reminds us about the promises we keep to ourselves” (p. x).

In this reminding, felt deep within our bodies, shame demands an acknowledgment that for Probyn (2005) compels an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves that can be considered productive if it leads to us asking the following questions: Why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions that have either brought shame upon myself or caused someone else’s shame? In this way, Probyn argues, shame is “positive in its self-evaluative role; it can even be self-transforming. This is possible, however, *only where shame is acknowledged*” (p. xii-xiii, emphasis added). Thus, in acknowledging my shame to self and others about how I used the h-index, and by addressing the questions posed by her, I am vividly reminded of the values and promises I want to keep to myself about being a “good” colleague and professor, and what I need to do in the future to re-attune myself to these values and promises.

Spectacle 1 can also assist others in re-attuning themselves. It could be used as part of an educative process suggested by Smyth (2017) for challenging the destructive impact of neoliberalism in the academy, and the constant pull to construct and fabricate ourselves as artificial persons. For example, in terms of the descriptive phase of this process described by Smyth that intervenes in the flow of events occurring to us or around us, Spectacle 1 might raise questions like: *What is happening here to Andrew? What is he doing? What would I do and feel like in his situation?* In moving to the *inform* stage that Smyth talks of different questions are asked, such as: *How do we (does he) make sense of this? What does it mean?* Finally, in the *confront* stage the questions asked include: *Why are we (is Andrew) doing it this way? Who says this is the way we (or Andrew) should be doing it? Who is this working for, and who is being dispossessed and disadvantaged?*

The process of re-attuning oneself and others might also be assisted by considering the place of laughter, or lack of it, within an audit culture. Thus, in Spectacle 1, there was no place for laughter but in Spectacle 2 there is. At the time, I did not realize that laughter was an aspect of parrhesia in action. As Fox (2018) notes, however, besides using straight-talking to create fusion with an audience, the parrhesiast can also skillfully use “humour to express an audience’s feeling that the world is fractured, ambiguous and multiple” (p. 90). Kramer (2020) also makes the case that humor can be integral in courageous truth-telling and subverting oppressive power structures:

To expand on a cliché, one can *speak truth to power* and amuse; one can highlight a serious moral incongruity through the lens of playful laughter; one can be funny without being frivolous; one can be a parrhesiastes and a humorist. Indeed, a humorous parrhesiastes who cultivates a desire to seek out and even enjoy

the experience of dissonance, confusion, and doubt, all of which can ignite philosophical thinking, might be the ideal non-violent gadfly. (pp. 27–28)

In addition to playful laughter, Claassens (2015) argues for the importance of “tragic laughter” in order “to survive, as a means of maintaining one’s subjectivity and dignity in the midst of dignity-denying circumstances” (p. 155). For Bussie (2007), tragic laughter is a subversive form of protest, and survival strategy, that exhibits a transformative effect in criticizing the status quo and resisting oppressive systems by refusing to bend to the will of those in power and to internalize the oppressor’s values. Such laughter, she suggests, testifies to the existence of an “autonomous self who not only exists but also makes choices independent of social authorities and thinks outside their ideological framework. Laughter is a form of free thought, which is in and of itself a negation of oppression” (pp. 39–40).

If, as Han (2018) suggests, dataism dissolves the body into data, then playful or tragic laughter as a strongly *corporeal* experience can serve an important function in resisting this process and refusing to become an artificial person in the audit culture. As Vlieghe (2014) points out, “while laughing, *we are our bodies*” (p. 150). Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1984) and his exploration of the shift from carnivalesque laughter in Medieval times to a more tamed and controlled kind of laughter in Modern times, Vlieghe makes the case that the former needs to be reinvigorated today as a positive force and a form of life-affirmation. For him, such corporeal laughter may create a “fundamental transformation of individual and collective life, and thus the possibility of something new and unforeseeable is opened . . . during laughter, we experience what it means to ‘live’ together at an entirely corporeal level” (pp. 159–160). In such moments, Vlieghe argues, an unconditional and immediate equality is achieved that allows a significant transformation of individual and collective existence.

In support of Vlieghe (2014), Stengel (2014) suggests that laughter, if taken seriously, can mark a breakdown of experience that creates space for reflective listening and thinking, for the diffusion of difficult affect, and for the disruption of habit that makes growth possible by clearing a space for response rather than reaction. She notes that by putting emotions (both positive and negative) into circulation, “It allows the one laughing to think and feel through immediate discomfort or delight toward a considered action that represents one’s best self” (p. 201). Such considered action when emotions, like shame, are put into circulation can play a part in interrupting the process of becoming an artificial person if this does not represent the best self that one aspires to.

With regard to re-attuning ourselves as part of an educative process, Stengel (2014) reflects on the educational payoff of laughter in terms of what it leaves open to those who

seek to grow and inspire growth. Thus, she asks: What happens after the laughter? For her, this depends upon how those involved respond to the pedagogical opportunities provided by the various forms of disruption (affective, cognitive and behavioral) caused by laughter, and how they keep open the space and time that laughter buys to derail premature closure, encourage thoughtful response, and reframe the cause of their laughter within new narratives of meaning. Significantly, in relation to the laughter that occurred in Spectacle 2 above in partial reaction to Spectacle 1, Stengel points out that laughter is not an answer. Rather, she states, it is a signal that prompts the wise pedagogue to interrogate the moment and ask a series of questions to those involved about their “prior understandings of, emotional states about, and typical ways of doing whatever is being asked of them in the days and moments before the laughter” (p. 209).

Engaging in parrhesia, particularly when used pedagogically in combination with the corporeality of laughter would appear to be one way in which the process of becoming and being an artificial person within the audit culture might be interrupted, interrogated, resisted, and refused. Clearly, given the potential risks involved in doing so, the spaces where this might occur need to be chosen with care at both the individual and collective level. Universities are not, however, unitary organizations. Spaces within and outside of them can be found and used creatively to form holding environments. This is particularly so if we consider Rolfe’s (2013) notion of the “paraversity” which is an “invisible, subversive, virtual institution that exists alongside the visible University of Excellence, neither inside it nor outside it” (p. 39). For him, within the paraversity, spaces for communicating differently about oneself and others take the form of rhizomic networks in which each individual constitutes a node that can, potentially, connect it with any and all others regardless of job title or position in the corporate hierarchy. For all this to happen, Jones (2018) suggests we need to be attentive to the open-ended and processual notion of “spacing” rather than “space” because a spacing perspective recognizes that university actors “conceive, appropriate and socially produce their own lived, experienced, embodied spaces” (p. 3).

Adopting a spacing perspective, according to Jones (2018), not only sharpens our awareness of provisional spatio-temporal constellations that are in process, alive, and unstable, but also how they can be contested by the creative use of counter-spacing as a form of resistance. As an example of this process in action, Jones offers an autoethnographic account of an initiative called the “Slow Swimming Club” that was set up by him as a reaction to the increased pressures of the audit culture and which took place outside the central university space. As this club developed, he describes how creative resistance was enacted through counter-spacing in ways that not only served a restorative

and re-attunement function for those involved but also led to changes in how spaces were defined, contested, and used back in the university setting in a process of what Jones calls “transformative spacing.” These same forms of spacing were used by Jubas and Seidel (2016) when they took up knitting together in their university workplace and in their homes. For them, taking up this practice enabled them to reanimate and re-attune their work in the academy by creating a space of collaborative, creative thinking, doing, and sense making that interrupted, even if only momentarily, the directives of the audit culture to speed up and keep count of everything.

Inspired by the work of Tree (2018), and in collaboration with a number of her colleagues, Moriarty (2019) also creatively used counter and transformative spacing both within and outside the university as part of a rewilding process. For her, such rewilding “helped me to confront the neoliberal I have become, while considering the academic I want to be, and guiding me on how to move towards that stranger, that other self” (p. 216). This is most evident in a list that Moriarty provides of the contrast between her “neoliberal self” and her “rewilded self.” For example, while her neoliberal self is unboundaried her rewilded self knows when to stop, and while her neoliberal self reads emails at 11pm, her rewilded self sleeps or has sex at 11pm. Thus, for Moriarty and those involved, rewilding acted as a form of resistance. It also had a re-attuning and restorative effect that helped them take care of themselves and those around them as they recovered their sense of self and navigated, rather than just be subsumed by, the effects of neoliberal management and the audit culture. Significantly, laughter clearly played a role in the rewilding process described by Moriarty, and I imagine that laughter of various kinds was also present when Jubas and Seidel (2016) knitted together and when academic staff took part in the Slow Swimming Club described by Jones (2018).

Given the multiple pressures exerted upon academics working in the neoliberal university permeated by an audit culture, the *restorative* function of creative spacing that allows for re-attuning and laughter to take place as described above by Jones (2018), Jubas and Seidel (2016), Moriarty (2019), and in my story of Spectacle 2, is of no small importance. Sadly, the current climate in the academy is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future and may actually be exacerbated in the aftermath of the Covid Pandemic. Our ability, therefore, to work on spacing rather than be worked over by it becomes crucial in preventing the mental and physical collapse of both ourselves and our colleagues. For many, including professors, this might be the best they can do at the moment. In this sense, laughing as a subversive move toward making light of a dire situation and just “hanging in there” becomes a form of resistance in itself, limited perhaps in effecting structural change, but resistance none-the-less and not to be demeaned

or underestimated in its effect. My suggestion, therefore, is that wherever we can find or create the spaces required that they are grasped collectively as sources of conviviality, affirmation, and collegiality, as well as restoration and resistance. In such spaces, I also hope, for all our sakes, there will be the sound of laughter.

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Notes

1. Negative developments since the 1980s for those working in universities are well documented by Collini (2017), Smyth (2017), and Tourish (2019). For a comparison of the key characteristics of the university of the 60s, 70s, and early 80s versus the neoliberal universities of the late 80s onwards, see Davies et al. (2006), and for a comparison of the publicly orientated university versus the market-orientated/neoliberal university, see Spooner (2018).
2. Parts of this letter have been modified to maintain the anonymity of others and out of respect for my colleagues.

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